

Agnes Batory: The Politics of EU Accession Ideology, Party Strategy and the European Question in Hungary

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Agnes Batory: *The Politics of EU Accession Ideology, Party Strategy and the European Question in Hungary*
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There has recently been growing research interest in political party positions towards European integration in the new European Union (EU) member states. *The Politics of EU Accession* provides insight into the process through which the political parties in accession states come to formulate their position regarding the EU accession of their country and the implications of membership. Batory argues that these positions barely change later on. In order to lay out this process, Batory investigates the politics of EU accession in Hungary through a close examination of the contestation of European integration in national politics in Hungary. Next, Batory presents a comprehensive study of party ideologies and attitudes to Europe in Hungary. The author supports her reading of political parties by presenting an outline of public opinion and how parties integrate their voters into this process. Finally, the author focuses on the referendum on EU membership in Hungary and demonstrates the exact format of the politics of coalition-building and the relationship between the government and the opposition in Hungary during this process.

The recent literature on comparative party politics of Euroscepticism points to the general debate on how to qualify and classify various levels of Euroscepticism [e.g. Neumayer 2008; Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008]. It also illustrates that there is a debate about whether Europe has any impact on the configuration of national party positions at all. Mair [2000] argues that party systems at the domestic level have proved resilient to any direct impact from Europe and related issues often become depoliticised in domestic politics. Mudde [2004], however, suggests that EU member-

ship will only increase the already existing divides between the (urban) centre and the (rural and industrial) periphery in the member states. In contrast, Batory channels the discussion on cleavages back to Mair [2000], agreeing with Mair that post-communist politics was unlikely to be shaped by a strong cleavage structure.

Batory starts her book by raising some general questions, such as: What lies behind political parties' attitudes to EU membership and European integration? What induces them to change their positions? And what factors account for the politicisation or depoliticisation of the European issue in the party system? Her context for discussing these issues is Hungary, which is clearly interesting, but the reader would obtain a better understanding of this single-case story with a comparative, supplementary depiction of similar processes in the other new EU member states. The book engages with three topics. These are: the eastward expansion of the EU, the behaviour of political parties in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and what may be called the domestic politics of European integration, that is, the way politics in EU member states shapes the popular perceptions and the positions of national party governments on Europe.

While discussing these topics at length, Batory (p. 27) looks for an answer to the question that she raises in the book's introductory chapter: whether the association of European issues with existing cleavages will contribute to the politicisation of 'Europe' or to its subjugation to and masking by more salient conflicts in society. In an attempt to illustrate how contention over the question of Europe differs from the existing cleavages, Batory (p. 43) argues that party ideologies may not be able to accommodate issues as highly complex and multifaceted as European integration. Hence, the 'meaning of Europe' in the national contexts is due to change given the meanings that different parties may attribute to

the economic and political aspects of European integration. This is especially important in a political system as polarised as Hungary's. In polarised contexts, the meaning of Europe is bound to change depending on who sets the rhetorics of integration or on how the issues related to European integration are nationalised in domestic political games.

In this respect, Batory (pp: 51–60) documents in detail how Hungarian parties see Europe. The parties documented are not only parliamentary parties but also those marginal ones such as the Workers' Party or the Justice Party. It is important to know the positions of such parties because the complicated mechanisms of Hungarian law on national referenda enable even small parties to collect enough signatures to initiate referenda. With regard to the dynamics of inter-party relations and their impact on parties' views on 'Europe', Batory determines that the central issue is the parties' proximity to power. Hence, the discussion in this regard relates to the extent to which holding executive office and the proximity to government influence the Hungarian parties' positions on the EU. Batory shows that being in office constrains governing parties in politicising the issue of European integration and the parties in office had every incentive to keep the process technical and apolitical. The translation of EU conditionality into domestic politics is consequently affected by the political parties' positions as office holders.

The book also shows how accession negotiations and the final accession settlement affects party positions towards the accession referendum. Issues such as the transition period, labour mobility, land ownership of EU nationals, CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) support to farmers, and the centralisation of decision-making that Brussels represents were all of major importance in the formulation of party positions towards European integration. Inevitably, this sheds light on referendum poli-

tics in the accession states. While there have been previous studies on this aspect of EU accession in relation to the 1995 enlargement, especially with regard to Norway and Sweden, Batory provides the first detailed documentation of this issue in Hungary.

In Batory's research on the study of electoral behaviour in EU referenda, the most notable feature of the Hungarian vote to emerge is the power of party cues and political leadership, especially with respect to Fidesz (the Alliance of Young Democrats – Hungarian Civic Union) voters. Fidesz's criticisms of the final deal of the accession negotiations that the government signed with Brussels, party leader Viktor Orbán's initial silence on the party's full-scale support for the 'Yes' vote in the referendum, and hence the ambiguity in the party's position towards the deal which set the conditions of Hungary's accession to the EU affected the participation rate. Hence, the signals that the main opposition party sent out and the ambiguity of its leader had a more decisive effect on the process of the referendum than the government's campaign. Batory also shows the impact of outsourcing a referendum campaign and how skilled PR activities in support of the 'Yes' vote in EU referenda can package EU-related issues – in this case membership – in overly commercialised terms and target viewers or readers on the basis of the lowest common denominator. Discussing the politicisation of accession by the party leader, Batory comes to the general conclusion that politicisation decreases the likely support that membership would have received.

The debates the author presents are a bit dated and reflect the scope of the discussion at the end of the accession talks and the referendum rather than the most recent format of discussion around European integration in Hungary. Nevertheless, the book allows the reader to understand the historical context of EU accession in

Hungary. The conclusion is that what distinguished parties from one another were the conditions under which they endorsed Hungarian EU membership and the nature, rather than the presence or absence, of their European orientations. While small parties could afford to put forward anti-EU positions, the main opposition party, Fidesz, could not afford to present a campaign focusing on rejection of the accession agreement, but instead presented an ambiguous stance. Thus, Fidesz criticised the accession deal that the government agreed with the EU rather than EU membership itself. In a way, this gives a clear signal of how parties make EU-related issues a part of domestic political games. And, to be a bit more forthcoming than the author herself (p. 82), one could plausibly state that EU-related issues can reinforce domestic political cleavages.

In the end, Batory shows that the discussions surrounding the EU and party policies towards the EU are affected by an inward debate. The author cleverly puts the position of Fidesz towards the EU at the heart of her portrait of the politics of EU accession in Hungary. Fidesz was not only the party in power during a significant period of the accession talks, but subsequently it also assumed a role that alternated between Europragmatism, Eurorealism, and Euroscepticism. It is crucial for researchers in the field to trace Fidesz's position on the details of EU accession in Hungary during the time when accession talks were being finalised, and Batory provides insight into this period. New research in the field should identify the more recent expressions of party positions on European integration five years after enlargement to the East.

Indeed, in Hungary, a lingering question for conservative circles is whether EU membership is a deception that gives the upper hand to international capital at the expense of the Hungarian economy and domestic business. As Batory shows, Fidesz

already voiced a feeling of deception in the final settlement of the accession treaty when it left office after its electoral defeat in 2002. Fidesz was especially critical of the membership terms regarding EU nationals' land ownership rights, agricultural subsidies, and, last but not the least, the restrictions on the rights of Hungarian nationals to work in most of the EU pre-enlargement states for a seven-year transition period.

To conclude, the book uses clear and concise language. It presents Hungary as a case study and convincingly shows that, even in a highly Europhile country, the politics of EU accession can be contentious. While discussing the process of EU accession, the book also succinctly presents a political history of modern Hungary and the history of relations between the European Union and Hungary. It fills a gap in the literature on current Hungarian politics. Its scope makes it an interesting reference both for academic research and graduate and undergraduate modules in European integration, European politics, and East European politics.

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